

On the VAX, we were safe from email viruses. With Outlook Express, we can be vulnerable to different types of virus attacks (most we can prevent, but our safety is inversely related to our level of convenience – i.e., safe emailing is hard work, risky emailing is easy). I've assembled some suggestions, depending on your level of willingness to sacrifice ease for safety.

Rule 1 : Don't open it!

First rule of safe emailing is to not open any emails from people you don't know, or emails that look suspicious. Any unknown message with an "interesting/titillating" subject line is probably a spam message (junk email), or possibly a virus. Delete it before reading it (if possible). Now, if my machine gets infected, and starts sending out infected viruses .. you might see a message from me and say "oh, that's from Scott – I know him – I can open that message", and then get infected anyway. But if we can prevent the initial infection, that will remove the possibilities of later infections. That's also an argument for looking "ahead" in the email list to make sure you don't have one later that says "Don't open that previous email!"

Rule 2 : Don't double-click any programs or attachment links unless you know what they are!

You can trigger a virus by actively launching it. A message can come in with an executable program attached, or even some script code, that can be run if you double-click on the link. [Note: you can save attachments by right clicking on the link .. or by using the "save attachments" type button. Just "saving" them won't trigger a virus, but if you open them from the hard drive (inside a program or not), you could still trigger it].

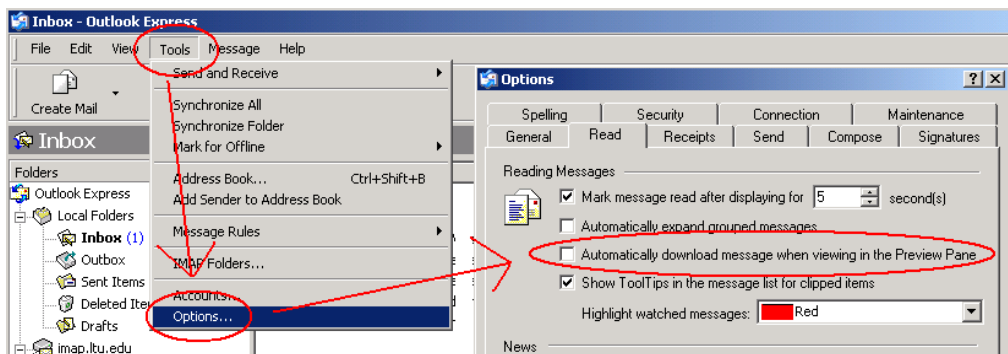
Corollary to Rules 1 and 2 : Viruses can be automatic – you don't have to do anything to get them!

You don't even have to open anything, or double-click anything for you to receive/trigger a virus! The "preview pane" in Outlook Express allows part of the message to be downloaded (though not the attachments, until you say so), but that might be enough to trigger an "active script" virus – something that runs as the mail message is previewed. Outlook Express, unfortunately, comes with "active scripting" enabled by default. And, Blackboard needs your machine to be able to run "active scripting", so we can't turn it off completely, or we won't be able to use Blackboard!

I have some screen shots of various settings you can make to Outlook Express to make it more resistant to viruses. The further you read, the more paranoid the settings are, but safer {and thus more work to read email}.

1) Turn off "Downloading in the Preview Pane" (Very highly recommended!)

The preview pane (lower right corner) is handy to be able to see what the message is as you move through the emails. When you click on the message line in the upper right window (the list of messages), it will automatically download into the preview pane. This is where those active scripts can get triggered. If you don't want to automatically download new messages into that pane, you should go to the Tools menu, then down to Options, select the READ tab, and turn off that feature .. as shown below :



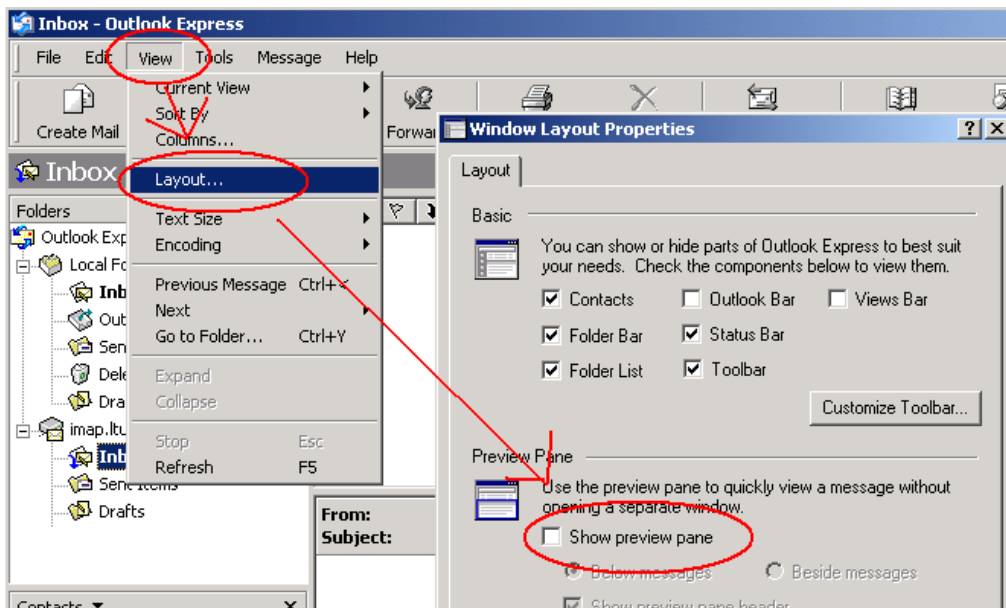
You will get a message in that preview pane, saying that the message has not been downloaded, and to click on a link, or press the spacebar to download it. Once downloaded (i.e. read) then in the future you will be able to just preview it normally, without that extra step.

One reason for changing this would be to allow you to delete a message in the above email list, WITHOUT downloading the dangerous message. (Even “right-clicking” will bring up the downloaded message before you get a chance to delete it, unless you disable that automatic download.)

The drawback to this is that you have to click the mouse, or hit the spacebar for each new message (the first time). Previously read messages should show up in the preview window without any further action.

2) Turn off the Preview Pane itself (Your choice .. Scott now does this.)

In theory, not triggering the viruses yourself (by double-clicking on some unknown/suspicious linke/program), and not automatically downloading the messages should stop almost all viruses that might get to us. I sometimes had trouble with the “turn off the automatic download” – it didn’t always stay off (or rather, some got downloaded when I didn’t want them to!). As I couldn’t figure out why it wasn’t working, I chose to just avoid the whole question, and turn off the preview pane itself. Now, to open a message, I double-click on it in the list, and it will open a separate window (handy if you want to copy/paste between windows). This gives me the ability to right click on a message line, and delete it before it even gets downloaded (that would be the safest way to get rid of suspicious emails). This is the method that I’m currently using, and you can set it up (once you’ve also done the other methods above) like this :

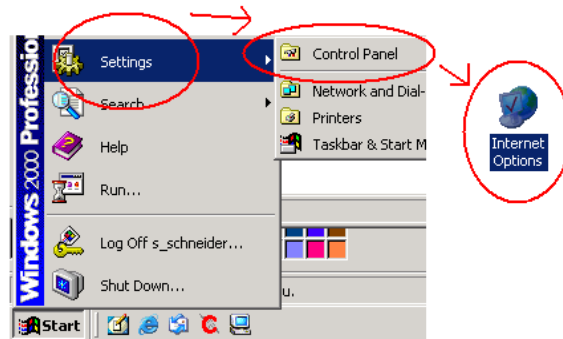


3) Turn off Active Scripting (This we CAN’T do! .. at least, not and run Blackboard also)

Unfortunately, if we turn off the active scripting, we can’t get into the Blackboard web pages. We could set the scripting to “Prompt” – which would mean that every time something on the internet (email or web pages) wants to run a script, you will get a message asking if you want to allow it. This would make your machine even safer, but it would be a pain in the neck when using Blackboard, because you’ll get the message about 3-5 times as you sign in to one of your pages (and maybe more after that – I couldn’t stand it any longer).

If you do want to set it to “PROMPT”, there are steps on the next page ... but unfortunately, I think it would interfere enough with our use of the computer, I don’t recommend it, unless you are really paranoid about viruses.

A) You start by going into the Internet Options applet in the Control panel.



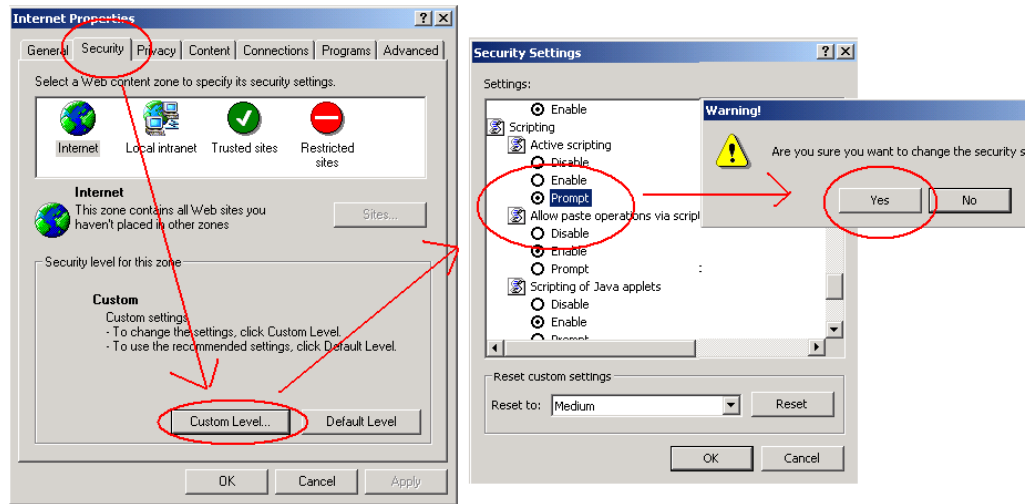
B) Then navigate through the tabs and dialogs as shown below :

Click the SECURITY tab ...

Click the CUSTOM LEVEL button ...

Navigate down until you find the SCRIPTING section ..

Set the Active Scripting to "PROMPT"



Should you worry about viruses?

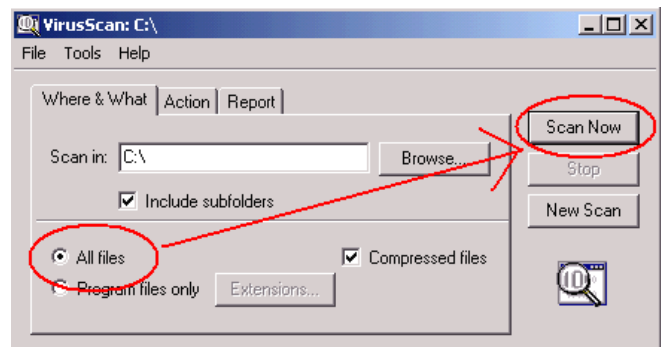
I wouldn't lose sleep over them, but I would be cautious about any suspicious messages. If you open one by mistake, or get a message from a trusted person that you think might be a virus, you could stop what you are doing and do an active scan on your machine. If you think you have a virus (or just want to be sure you don't ..) start an active scan like this :



And then I would check ALL FILES
And then click the SCAN NOW button.

(This will take 20-40 minutes depending on how many files you have – I do it maybe once a month .. or if I suspect something).

Note : The virus protection software we are running does do some scanning as we receive things – you just never know how recent a virus might be.



Conclusion :

Take at least a few of the steps above, and be careful about how you receive unknown emails. One sloppy person can infect the others!